

Georgia Baptists oust second church with woman pastor

by [Bob Allen](#)

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ALBANY, Ga. (ABP) – For the second year in a row, the Georgia Baptist Convention has withdrawn fellowship from one of its most historic member churches for calling a woman as pastor.

Meeting Nov. 15-16 at Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Ga., more than 1,000 GBC messengers endorsed a March vote by the convention's executive committee declaring that [Druid Hills Baptist Church](#) in Atlanta is not a "cooperating church" under the denomination's articles of faith.

The convention overwhelmingly accepted a recommendation by its executive committee stating "that Druid Hills Baptist Church in Atlanta is not a cooperating church as defined in Article 2, Section 1 of the constitution, because a woman is serving as co-pastor and that Druid Hills Baptist Church of Atlanta be excluded from the convention and all rights and privileges thereof."

That article defines cooperation in terms of fidelity to [the 2000 version](#) of the Southern Baptist Convention's Baptist Faith and Message statement, which says in part, "While men and women are gifted for service within the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

Mimi Walker, co-pastor of Druid Hills with her husband, Graham, who teaches at McAfee School of Theology, has been listed as a pastor in the state convention's annual record book since 2003. Last year convention leaders viewed that as "a matter of concern," said executive committee member Tom Rush, prompting a meeting between leaders of the convention and congregation. After the meeting, the executive committee [approved a recommendation](#) by its administrative committee to withdraw fellowship from Druid

Hills.

'Selective creedal application'

Carey Charles, a deacon and fourth-generation member at Druid Hills, described the church's goal to messengers as "first and foremost missional."

"When Baptist churches are closing their doors inside the I-285 perimeter [the freeway that surrounds the central part of the Atlanta area] today at a historically rapid pace, and that [what was] once 166 Baptist churches are now down to a mere 39, we at Druid Hills Baptist have deliberately chosen to stay and bear a testimony as stated in our core values -- to love God, to share Christ, to serve others and grow in faith," Charles said.

"In staying, we recognize that we must ask tough questions, missional questions; not something that unifies only our church, but also that unifies our church in our neighborhood, city and world immediately surrounding us," he said. "Therefore we chose the Walkers, both of whom have been recognized as partners in mission by the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention for 12 years of service in the Philippines, who deeply share our passion for what is now a growing mission field inside Atlanta."

Michael Ruffin, pastor of First Baptist Church in Fitzgerald, Ga., urged messengers to consider "selective creedal application" of the confession of faith.

"So far as I can tell, we are applying no other provision of or line in the Baptist Faith and Message statement in the way as the line about the office of pastor being reserved for men," Ruffin said. "If an autonomous Georgia Baptist Church calls a woman as a pastor, they will now automatically be deemed a non-cooperating church."

"There are many, many, many more provisions in the Baptist Faith and Message," Ruffin warned. "I don't want the GBC to become even more creedal in its application of the Baptist Faith and Message than it has on this one score. We really should consider the arbitrariness of such

an application. I think we also ought to consider the possibility that if we get serious about holding every Georgia Baptist Convention church accountable to every line in the Baptist Faith and Message as we are this one, we'll soon have no churches left."

Executive committee chairman Fred Evers, pastor of Northside Baptist Church in Tifton, Ga., defended the recommendation.

"We are acting on what we believe are biblically held convictions," he said. "We certainly affirm the right of any church to call whom they will as pastor. We certainly want to affirm the great contribution of faithful women who serve across our state in our churches in proper, biblical roles. We certainly affirm the great contribution that Druid Hills Baptist Church has made in the history of our Georgia Baptist Convention. However, we have, as a convention, clearly defined what constitutes a fully cooperating church in the Georgia Baptist Convention."

Historic congregation

Following the vote, the convention will no longer receive funds from the church and will not allow messengers from the congregation to the annual meeting. That ends a historic relationship dating back to the congregation's founding in 1914. [Louis Newton](#), who served as Druid Hills' pastor for four decades -- including a stint as president of the Southern Baptist Convention -- is one of the most recognizable names in Georgia Baptist history. He wrote daily columns for two of the state's largest newspapers and was often called "Mr. Baptist."

Last year Georgia Baptists [took similar action](#) against [First Baptist Church](#) in Decatur, Ga., a long-time leading church in the convention until it [called Julie Pennington-Russell](#) as pastor in 2007.

"The Georgia Baptist Convention has never been opposed to women serving in ministry positions other than pastor," Robert White, the convention's executive director, said in a statement. "Women are serving as gifted leaders in churches all across our state"